

July 23, 2002: Commission Asks Sec. Powell to Raise Religious Freedom Issues With Vietnam at ASEAN Meeting

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

July 23, 2002

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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, a federal agency advising the Administration and Congress, last week wrote Secretary of State Colin L. Powell, asking that he raise religious freedom issues with Vietnamese officials during the ASEAN Regional Forum at the end of this month. The text of the letter follows:

July 17, 2002

Dear Secretary Powell:

I am writing on behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, which urges you to raise prominently the protection of religious freedom in Vietnam during your upcoming participation at the ASEAN Regional Forum in July 2002. We also urge you to impress upon Vietnamese officials that improvements in the protection of religious freedom in Vietnam are critical to continuing progress in U.S.-Vietnam relations.

Since the Congress ratified the U.S.-Vietnam Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) in September 2001, the protection of religious freedom in Vietnam continues to be minimal at best. In February 2002, the Commission sent a delegation to visit that country. Despite the increase in religious practice among the Vietnamese people in the last 10 years, the Vietnamese government continues its repressive policy toward all religions and their followers in Vietnam.

Key Vietnamese religious dissidents remain under house arrest or imprisoned, including two senior leaders of the outlawed Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) - Most Venerable Thich Huyen Quang and Venerable Thich Quang Do - and a Hoa Hao Buddhist leader, Mr. Le Quang Liem. Mr. Quang has been denied access to much needed medical treatment. In addition, Father Thaddeus Nguyen Van Ly, who last year submitted written testimony to the Commission, was sentenced to 15 years in prison after having been convicted on charges of "undermining state unity" and "slandering the government." During the Commission's visit, Vietnamese officials refused the delegation's requests to meet with these and other religious leaders who were either in prison or under house arrest.

Government officials continue to harass leaders of unregistered religious organizations and their followers, particularly unregistered Protestant fellowships, as well as clergy members of officially recognized religious groups who oppose government interference in their activities. At the same time, Vietnamese authorities have refused to register some religious groups. For example, the Vietnamese government has refused to register or permit any activity of Baha'i adherents, whose membership in Vietnam before 1976 counted close to 200,000. Meanwhile, provincial and local officials continue to force Hmong Christians in northwestern Vietnam to renounce their faith. Hmong Christian leaders have been arrested and beaten, and their followers are not allowed to meet in homes and conduct worship. Catholic bishops continue to have limits imposed on them by the government regarding the number of candidates who can be admitted to study for the priesthood as well as the number of qualified men who are allowed to be ordained to the priesthood.

Although the government recognized the Evangelical Church of Vietnam in the South in April 2001, that recognition

apparently has not been extended to the Montagnards who reside in the Central Highlands. Government repression of religious freedom for Montagnard Christians, coupled with an ongoing land dispute between the Montagnards and the government, led to unrest and government crackdown in February 2001 that ultimately resulted in the flight to Cambodia of over 1,000 Montagnards. Nonetheless, it appears that the Vietnamese government continues to violate the right to religious freedom of Montagnard Christians in the Central Highlands through arrests and the closing of churches.

In light of these conditions, the Commission urges you to raise these issues in substantive discussions with Vietnamese officials during your attendance at the ASEAN Regional Forum. In particular, we hope you will inquire about the confinement of Mr. Quang, Mr. Do, and Mr. Liem, and the imprisonment of Fr. Ly.

Furthermore, we wish to draw your attention to the following recommendations, first set out in our 2001 Annual Report. We urge you to press the Vietnamese government to take the following steps:

Release from imprisonment, detention, house arrest, or intimidating surveillance persons who are so restricted due to their religious identities or activities.

Permit full access to religious leaders by U.S. diplomatic personnel and government officials, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, and international human rights organizations. The government should also invite a return visit by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion.

Establish the freedom to engage in religious activities (including the freedom for members of religious groups to select their own leaders, worship publicly, express and advocate religious beliefs, and distribute religious literature) outside state-controlled religious organizations and eliminate controls on the activities of officially registered organizations. Allow indigenous religious communities to conduct educational, charitable, and humanitarian activities, in accordance with the UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination.

Permit religious groups to gather for observances of religious holidays.

Return confiscated religious properties.

Permit domestic Vietnamese religious organizations and individuals to interact with foreign organizations and individuals.

Permit domestic Vietnamese religious and other non-governmental organizations to distribute their own and donated aid.

Support exchanges between Vietnamese religious communities and U.S. religious and other non-governmental organizations concerned with religious freedom in Vietnam.

In its May 2001 report, the Commission also recommended that the U.S. government continue to support the ASEAN Human Rights Working Group, and that it should encourage the Vietnamese government to join the working group by establishing a national working group. The Commission urges you to take this opportunity to engage officials of the ASEAN working group in serious discussions about the promotion of human rights, including religious freedom, among ASEAN member states. Moreover, we urge you to impress upon Vietnamese officials that the establishment of a national working group by their government would be an important sign of Vietnam's commitment to protecting religious freedom and other human rights.

Thank you for your consideration of the Commission's recommendations.

We would be grateful if you would share with us the findings and achievements of your visit upon your return.

Respectfully,

Felice Gaer

Chair

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